THE AGRARIANS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FIFTY YEARS: AN ESSAY REVIEW

by WILLARD B. GATEWOOD, JR.

IN the fall of 1930 Harper and Brothers, an old and prestigious northern publishing house, brought out a collection of essays by "twelve Southerners," entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. Described at the time as a Southern or Southern Agrarian manifesto, the collection came into existence, according to one of the contributors, as "a sort of happening"—"a coalescence of circumstances and people and conditions" unlikely to reoccur. The contributors, known as the Agrarians, were for the most part natives of the rural, small-town areas of the westernmost South, and most at some point had been affiliated with Vanderbilt University. Those primarily responsible for the book had been central figures in a remarkable literary group based at Vanderbilt and known as the Fugitives. Among these were John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren. In some respects the Agrarians were "a translation of the Fugitives into a new, and more public, form of activity." Their manifesto, whatever else it was, was a "very Southern book." Despite some sentiment to entitle it *Tracts*

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Against Communism, the title finally chosen was taken from the Confederate anthem.

The Statement of Principles at the beginning of the volume avowed that "the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive vocation, and . . . should have the economic preference." As Southerners deeply committed to "a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way," the Agrarians argued that their own region offered proof of the beneficent effect of the soil upon the soul. Disavowing any idea of an "independent political destiny" for the South and occasionally noting that the region was not altogether without flaws, they nonetheless placed emphasis upon what they perceived as regional virtues—leisure, devotion to place and family, a sense of history and tradition, "scorn for dollar chasers," manners, and various other traits in danger of being destroyed by the industrialism promoted by enthusiasts of the New South gospel. Theirs was a protest against the material acquisitiveness, spiritual disorder, lack of purpose, destruction of individual integrity, and other trends in modern society that they associated with industrialism. According to Ransom, industrialism was "an insidious spirit, full of false promises and generally fatal to establishments," a malevolent force which "only a community of tough conservative habit," such as the South, could master. Southerners, the Agrarians believed, "must cultivate their provincial soul and not sell it for a mess of industrial pottage" lest their region become "an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community." While conceding that the South might be industrialized "in moderation," most agreed with Stark Young that Southerners should accept industrialism on their own terms, domesticate it, and create their own attitude toward it. The Agrarians called upon the South, as the last substantial barrier against mass dehumanization and the philistinization produced by industrialism, to preserve, indeed to nourish, its peculiarity and to assume a role of leadership in the counter-revolution against what Ransom termed the Great Progressive Principle. Small wonder, then, when in 1973, Sheldon Hackney discussed the South in terms of being the nation's largest and oldest counterculture, he cited the Agrarians as a prime example of the "old Southern sport of defining an alternative to the national consensus."

The initial reaction to *I'll Take My Stand* in the 1930s would scarcely have suggested the place that it would come to occupy in southern literature fifty years later. While a few contemporaries viewed it as a work of significance, far more dismissed it as the musings of a coterie of impractical, misguided, backward-looking literary men who had constructed an image of an ideal society without offering clues about bringing it into existence. Though alternately praised and damned since 1930, *I'll Take My Stand* has rarely been ignored. Despite its popularity as a topic of discussion and debate within intellectual circles, the book did not sell well and was allowed to go out of print. When Harper reissued it as a paperback in its Torchbook Series in 1962, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., an authority on the Agrarians, provided an introduction in which he described the significance of the work primarily in terms of its literary quality.

Not unexpectedly, in 1980, on the fiftieth anniversary of the original publication of *I'll Take My Stand,* the Agrarians and their manifesto came in for a good deal of attention. The four volumes under consideration here were a part of the commemorative effort. Having acquired the rights to *I'll Take My Stand* from Harper, Louisiana State University Press reissued it in 1977 as a volume in its Southern Civilization Series with a new introduction by Rubin. An additional printing in 1980 coincided with the semi-centennial of its original appearance. *A Band of Prophets,* edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan and also published by LSU, consists of six papers and a conversation among surviving contributors to the Agrarian manifesto which were part of a symposium at Vanderbilt University in 1980. The same year Thomas Daniel Young, also of Vanderbilt, presented the Lamar Lectures at Mercer University which were published under the title of *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered. Why the South Will Survive* is a collection of essays in which fifteen Southerners ponder their region "fifty years after *I'll Take My Stand.*" In addition to contributions by several of the original Agrarians, essays by certain individuals, notably Rubin, Havard, Cleanth Brooks, and John Shelton Reed, appear in more than one of these works. If the current assessments are any indication, the Agrarians and their vision of the good life, once ridiculed more

than championed, have now come into general favor. In none of these works is there anything remotely resembling the devastatingly harsh critiques of *I'll Take My Stand* that appeared in the 1930s. It may be, as some of the present writers suggest, that the earlier criticisms resulted from "naive misreadings" of the treatise. Or, as Donald Davidson said of Gerald Johnson, who thought it strange that the Agrarians had overlooked hookworm and pellegra, two of the most visible products of rural life in the South: he "didn't understand what we were talking about." But what appears to be a new and more favorable consensus in regard to the Agrarian manifesto is also related to the profound changes experienced by both the South and the nation since 1930. Whatever the reasons, the work is no longer viewed as an exercise in reactionary asceticism but rather as a "forward looking, even prophetic book."

The opening essay in *A Band of Prophets* is by Charles Roland, a distinguished historian, who provides the historical context of the Agrarian movement. *I'll Take My Stand,* he suggests, was written partly in response to outside criticism of the South in the 1920s by H. L. Mencken and others, especially in the wake of the Scopes Trial, and partly in response to the mood within the region itself, a mood engendered by advocates of the New South who appeared all too ready to abandon the "vital nexus" with the traditional South. Both Lewis Simpson in his "The Southern Republic of Letters and *I'll Take My Stand*" and Rubin in his "*I'll Take My Stand* and the Literary Tradition" elaborate upon themes that they have developed elsewhere. "By transforming the South into a symbol of a recovered society of myth and tradition," Simpson concludes, the Agrarians "would assert the community and spiritual authority of men of letters and make whole the fragmented realm of mind and letters." In pursuing his theme of Agrarianism as metaphor, Rubin characterizes *I'll Take My Stand* as a "poetic work," as "a form of pastoral rebuke," designed "to remind a modern community of the dangers of dehumanization." Robert B. Heilman agrees that the work belongs "to a strong non-localized tradition of dissent against the commercial and then industrial dogma of well-being." George Core's strange essay, focusing largely on the Fugitives and New Critics, brims with passion against the "numbing

weight" of the South's academic bureaucracy and academic mind on its literature. Despite the obstacles posed by the academic establishment, he contends, the Fugitives and Agrarians gave "the South back to the South" and made "it the greatest country of the American imagination in the twentieth century."

One of the most thoughtful essays in *A Band of Prophets* is by John Shelton Reed, a University of North Carolina sociologist. Emphasizing the sense of grievance manifested by the Southern Agrarians, he focuses attention on the similarities between *I'll Take My Stand* and nationalist manifestoes issued by backward but anti-colonial peoples around the world. Through a sort of rhetorical alchemy that transmuted vice into virtue and proclaimed that backward was beautiful, Reed argues, the Agrarians sought to "forge a new view of the South's past and its future" that inhabitants of the region "did not have to be ashamed of." Because the Agrarians were both nationalists and artists, their manifesto addressed issues more fundamental and more enduring than the regional conflict that occasioned it. If *I'll Take My Stand* had been merely another sectionalist broadside, Reed concludes, "it would not have the continuing, even increasing, importance it does appear to have."

In his *Waking Their Neighbors Up*, Thomas Daniel Young, the biographer of Ransom, begins with an explanation of how *I'll Take My Stand* came into being. Following an assessment of its initial reception, he then analyzes the wide variety of rhetorical devices employed by the contributors to the manifesto. "To my knowledge," he writes, "no other book of its kind in twentieth century literature offers so many different kinds of argumentation in defense of a single principle: to delineate what is essential as opposed to what is superficial and destructive in human society." Convinced that the basic attitudes that inspired the writings of the Agrarians "have had a profound influence upon Southern thought," Young is no less certain that their doctrines in the 1980s have a relevance that extends far beyond the South. They were "prophets all," striving to awaken their neighbors to the dangers of sacrificing the aesthetic values for the economic ones demanded by a materially acquisitive society.

Despite changes in the South and in the nation and the alterations in the relationship between the two during the past fifty

years, the fifteen Southerners who in 1980 contributed to *Why the South Will Survive* share with the twelve who wrote *I'll Take My Stand* a strong attachment to the South, a belief in its distinctiveness and the conviction that the region has much to offer "a troubled nation." Although the reader is assured that the fifteen Southerners writing about their region in 1980 avoid the "rancor and defensiveness" evident among the Agrarians, not all do so. To be sure, the rancor is muted, but the work in general is a defense of the South, not altogether devoid of defensiveness. Although loosely modeled after the Agrarian manifesto of 1930, *Why the South Will Survive* differs in some important ways from it. The tone is different; the sense of grievance less evident; the assurance that the "South will survive" greater. Nor can one quite imagine the Agrarians of 1930 including in their collection a piece by a black man, a serious consideration of country music, or a lengthy essay explaining the significance of the southern experience to the making of American foreign policy. As important as *Why the South Will Survive* is, especially as a document of social criticism, it is unlikely ever to be characterized as any sort of pastoral or as a "poetic work." In fact, the contributors are not primarily literary figures but rather historians, sociologists, politicians, attorneys, and educators, most of whom come from the Carolinas.

The introduction by Clyde N. Wilson of the University of South Carolina sets the tone by insisting that, unlike most books about the South, *Why the South Will Survive* frankly embraces the notion that the region is "a national asset, a priceless and irreplacable treasure that must be conserved." Its primary objective is not so much to analyze or to criticize the South as to affirm its values, since, in Wilson's view, "the South has always been primarily a matter of values, a peculiar repository of intangible qualities in a society preoccupied with quantification." The essays in this "manifesto of Southern pride," we are told, abound in evidence regarding how and why the South came to possess those factors essential to the nourishing of "the whole fabric of humane culture that makes for a satisfactory existence." Anticipating objections likely to be raised by critics, Wilson attempts to define the South and to answer those who insist that the South no longer differs significantly from the rest of the nation. In a view similar

to that expressed by Stark Young in *I'll Take My Stand,* Wilson points out that a changing South is not the same as a disappearing South, especially if the implication is that the region is disappearing into something called the American mainstream. American society outside the South has changed so dramatically in the last few decades, he maintains, that "the South is becoming more rather than less different." At any rate, Wilson asks: "Why should a society dedicated to pluralism exclude from respectability and self-determination its largest and most important and oldest minority?"

In diverse ways all of the essays in *Why the South Will Survive,* in lesser or greater degrees, affirm the worth of the South, its values and traditions. Some are highly personalized and anecdotal; others exhibit a penchant for analysis and broad interpretation; a few are inclined too much toward irrelevant digressions. Although most of the fifteen contributors seem certain that "the South will survive," there are nonetheless hints that portions of what was once viewed as the South no longer manifest characteristics identifiable as southern. For example, Thomas Landess's use of the phrase "where the South is still the South" suggests at least a degree of shrinkage has already occurred.

In the first essay in *Why the South Will Survive* John Shelton Reed, as usual, says much that is stimulating and valuable about the question of southern identity and about why regional differences appear to be increasing rather than disappearing. Much of his essay focuses on an analysis of the South's version of libertarianism which he describes as "the natural political expression of an individualistic ethos." Fred Hobson, a self-proclaimed southern moderate liberal among a group described as largely conservative, appears to be less certain than some of his colleagues about the survival of a distinctive South. His essay, "A South Too Busy to Hate," evidences a nagging fear that the region, like Atlanta, may not only be too busy to hate but also too busy to care—about its traditions, virtues, or anything else other than its business. The South, according to Hobson, defined and explained itself in and through adversity. Traditionally Southerners who wrote about their region did so with passion, either love, hate, pride, or shame. If the South's tradition of antimaterialism grew in part out of its poverty, Hobson is anxious

about the fate of that tradition in an age of comfort and relative prosperity. He is disturbed too by other things; he believes that what once was natural in the South is becoming self-conscious; what once was organic is becoming stylized. Cleanth Brooks, in his essay on "The Enduring South," finds much to commend in Southern religion which he relates to the region's historic resistance to utopian schemes and to its skepticism about human perfectability, but he is concerned about "the characteristic thinness of Southern theology" because it makes the region's "residual Christian orthodoxy" so vulnerable to the secular culture around it. Certainly one of the best essays in the collection is the one by George Garrett, the poet and novelist. Entitled "Southern Literature: Here and Now," his essay analyzes the state of literary arts in the South and its practitioners and persuasively argues that, contrary to predictions about southern literature being "on its last legs," the region's literary creativity is alive and extraordinarily vigorous. His view of the contribution of creative writing programs in southern universities stands in sharp contrast to George Core's indictment of the academy's role in what he terms "the institutionalization of literature."

The fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* provided Southerners with another opportunity to engage in an old and venerable enterprise, namely the contemplation of the nature, meaning, and value of a distinctive South. The works under review here, all of which were part of this commemorative effort, lend credence to David Potter's observation that the problem of southern identity is "a somewhat metaphysical question," no more likely to be answered to the satisfaction of everyone than the question of the Trinity. What constitutes the essence of this identity, to put it in contemporary slang, depends upon "where one is coming from." One does not have to subscribe to the particulars of the thesis advanced by Michael O'Brien in his highly significant *Idea of the American South,* which incidentally provides much insight into the mind and thought of the Agrarians, to appreciate the general validity of his suggestion that the South, whatever else it may be, is also a matter of perception. The South, he argues, "is centrally an intellectual perception . . . which has served to comprehend and weld an unintegrated social reality." In an era of an increasingly

urbanized, industrialized, air-conditioned, "post-racial" South, the region's social reality would appear to be even less integrated than at some points in the past.

John Shelton Reed is obviously correct in suggesting that southernness has indeed become a more complicated business than it appeared to be in the era of the Agrarians. Fully aware that it is no longer possible to identify the southern way of life with agrarianism and that the region's economy has become less distinctive within the past several decades, the interpreters of the contemporary South under review here nonetheless hold to the view that the region continues to manifest a substantial degree of cultural autonomy. Their concern, therefore, is with what may be called the subjective components of southern identity, that is values, attitudes, tastes, and habits. That these distinctive cultural attributes will remain sufficiently strong to insure the survival of the South's identity is at this juncture more of a hope than a certainty.

Confronted by what many view as a "troubled nation," especially a northern industrial-urban giant in trouble, and by a South that has experienced modernization, Southerners appear to be as self-consciously southern, or even more so, than when they perceived the North as a powerful, aggressive, and imperialistic giant bent on obliterating "the Southern way of life." The metamorphasis of the Inferior South into a Superior South may not be as complete as many assume or imply, but the notion is sufficiently widespread to detect among some Southerners evidences of a posture reminiscent of that credited by Frank Owsley in *I'll Take My Stand* to the North in its attitude toward the South: standing in Pharisaical judgment upon the rest of the nation, beating their chests, and thanking-thee-O-Lord-that-we-are-not-as-other-men. In view of the manners, skepticism about human perfectability, and other traits that Southerners presumably possess, preemptive claims in behalf of regional virtues somehow appear inappropriate, unbecoming, and unsouthern.